

What Makes a Good Story? Tips for Young Authors by Aaron Shepard

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This installment in our Author Series comes from Aaron Shepard, the award-winning author of *One-Eye! Two-Eyes! Three-Eyes!*, *The Sea King's Daughter*, *The Baker's Dozen*, *The Legend of Lightning Larry*, and many more children's books from publishers large and small. His stories have also appeared often in *Cricket* magazine. Check out his website at <http://www.aaronshelp.com/> to get loads of free treats and resources for teachers, librarians, storytellers, children's authors, parents, kids, and more. You'll also find info on Aaron, his books, and his author visits.

Good writers often break rules—but they know they're doing it! Here are some good rules to know.

Theme:

A theme is something important the story tries to tell us—something that might help us in our own lives. Not every story has a theme, but it's best if it does. Don't get too preachy. Let the theme grow out of the story, so readers feel they've learned it for themselves. You shouldn't have to say what the moral is.

Plot:

Plot is most often about a conflict or struggle that the main character goes through. The conflict can be with another character, or with the way things are, or with something inside the character, like needs or feelings. The main character should win or lose at least partly on their own, and not just be rescued by someone or something else. Most often, the character learns or grows as they try to solve their problem. The conflict should get more and more tense or exciting. The tension should reach a high point or "climax" near the end of the story, then ease off. The basic steps of a plot are: conflict begins, things go right, things go WRONG, final victory (or defeat), and wrap-up. The right-wrong steps can repeat.

A novel can have several conflicts, but a short story should have only one.

StoryStructure:

At the beginning, jump right into the action. At the end, wind up the story quickly. Decide about writing the story either in "first person" or in "third person." Third-person pronouns are "he," "she," and "it"—so writing in third person means telling a story as if it's all about other people. The first-person pronoun is "I"—so writing in first person means telling a story as if it happened to you. Even if

you write in third person, try to tell the story through the eyes of just one character—most likely the main character. Don't tell anything that the character wouldn't know. This is called "point of view." If you tell something else, create a whole separate section with the point of view of another character. Decide about writing either in "present tense" or in "past tense." Writing in past tense means writing as if the story already happened. That is how most stories are written. Writing in present tense means writing as if the story is happening right now. Stick to one tense or the other!

Characters:

Before you start writing, know your characters well. Your main character should be someone readers can feel something in common with, or at least care about. You don't have to describe a character completely. It's enough to say one or two things about how a character looks or moves or speaks. A main character should have at least one flaw or weakness. Perfect characters are not very interesting. They're also harder to feel something in common with or care about. And they don't have anything to learn. In the same way, there should be at least one thing good about a "bad guy."

Setting:

Set your story in a place and time that will be interesting or familiar.

Style and Tone:

Use language that feels right for your story. Wherever you can, use actions and speech to let readers know what's happening. Give speech in direct quotes like "Go away!" instead of indirect quotes like "She told him to go away." You don't have to write fancy to write well. It almost never hurts to use simple words and simple sentences. That way, your writing is easy to read and understand.

Always use the best possible word—the one that is closest to your meaning, sounds best, and creates the clearest image. If you can't think of the right one, use a thesaurus.

Carefully check each word, phrase, sentence, and paragraph. Is it the best you can write? Is it in the right place? Do you need it at all? If not, take it out!

The best stories have a strong theme, a fascinating plot, a fitting structure, unforgettable characters, a well-chosen setting, and an appealing style. Try for all of these.